

# BELGIUM SPLIT OVER EU ENVIRONMENTAL PLAN

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Wallonia pushes for even stricter rules, while Flanders rejects the ambitious nature restoration plan for fear of a new round of farmer protests—leaving the divided

## De Croo government unable to find a solution.

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Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said it was time to “hit the pause button” on the EU’s nature restoration plan since the country’s two regions seem to be unable to find common ground on the issue, an occurrence all too common in the small Western European nation, *Politico* reported on Thursday, May 25th.

The aim of the EU’s proposed [Nature Restoration Regulation](#) is to restore at least 20% of the bloc’s “degraded ecosystems” by 2030, and all such areas by 2050. This ambitious plan may appeal to a large segment of the population, but there’s one group who see it only as a looming disaster: the farmers.

In particular, farmers constitute a powerful electorate in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern region of Belgium, where the conservative government—preparing for elections next year—does everything to shield their interests from the harmful effects of Brussels’ overregulation.

“The goals are very ambitious, and are imposed from higher up without taking into account local realities,” said Flemish Agriculture Minister Jo Brouns. “In Flanders or the Netherlands, with the high population density and limited space, you can’t do as much as in the Nordics or Eastern Europe.”

Indeed, the problem seems eerily similar to what Dutch farmers have been struggling with for years. In the Netherlands, the dispute started four years ago with crushing new restrictions on nitrogen emissions. Now, it has reached the point when the government is [threatening to expropriate](#) some 3,000 farms if the owners won’t sell them ‘voluntarily’—all for the sake of reducing pollution and restoring nature.

Flemish farmers do not want to let things get anywhere close to the Dutch level. Earlier this year, they were able to force the Flemish government to [backpedal](#) on a similar bill to mandate nitrogen cuts.

Even if Wallonia is not only on board, but pushes for an even more ambitious version, Flanders seems adamant about opposing the restoration plan (mostly to avoid another round of farmer protests), so the Belgian government has no choice but to 'pause' the legislation.

According to PM De Croo, he gave in not because of the political deadlock, but in order to not hinder other, more important, green projects. "Is this the right time for these new legislations when our industry is crucial to make the energy transition happen?" the prime minister asked, adding that "by overburdening people with rules and regulations, we risk losing public support for the green agenda."

However, there is no agreement even within De Croo's federal government. It's not surprising, considering that the seven-party coalition took an astonishing 652 days to form, during which Belgium broke its previous world record from 2010 of being without a government for 541 days.

The loudest voice to want a stronger stance on nature restoration is the green coalition member Ecolo, which also holds the country's "Climate Change, Environment and Green Deal" cabinet, with Environmental Minister Zakia Katthabi pushing for strengthened targets, because she believes that the regulation would "ensure [the] resilience of our agriculture."

Therefore, De Croo's statement is "is unilateral. This is not the position of Belgium or the federal government," Adrien Volant, another member of Ecolo [said](#). "We shouldn't pause, we should instead hit the gas."

Nonetheless, the real problem is that if the two regions cannot reach a consensus on the

plan and file a unified national position, Belgium won't even have a say in the Council negotiations about it, which are expected to conclude by June 20th.